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FOR SPECIAL ENVOY GRATION FROM AMBASSADOR LEBARON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/22/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [QA](#) [SU](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SE GRATION'S APRIL 27-29 VISIT TO
QATAR

Classified By: Ambassador Joseph E. LeBaron, for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Embassy Doha welcomes your visit to Qatar. You have a confirmed appointment with the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (and principal point man on Qatar's Darfur initiative) Ahmed Al-Mahmoud. France's Special Envoy on Darfur, Issa Maraut, has been posted to the French Embassy in Doha since October and is eager to meet with you during your stay. We are also coordinating with your staff and other posts in the region on possible meetings with the various Darfur groups who may be in Doha during your stay.

¶2. (C) We know that your focus is Sudan, thus we start immediately below with our assessment of State Minister Al-Mahmoud and Qatar's policies towards Sudan (paras. 3-6). After that, we present our broader views on Qatar. We also discuss the key strategic trends in this country over the coming three years.

Qatar and Darfur

¶3. (C) Al-Mahmoud is an able diplomat, and he is committed to forging a peace agreement in Darfur. As you know from your recent telephone conversation with him, he views the situation there as a humanitarian catastrophe, and he genuinely wants to do what he can to help. Al-Mahmoud appears to be working closely with UN and African Union Envoy Djibril Bassole, speaking with him by phone almost daily. He understands the suspicions that the Fur, the rebel groups, and others have of Qatar's role in mediating the conflict on Darfur, especially after the Doha-hosted Arab League summit, which featured the attendance of indicted President al-Bashir. He appreciates the tools and experience that Bassole brings to the effort. He also recognizes that support from the United States, France, and the U.K. are essential, especially in bringing rebel leaders such as Abdul Wahid to the negotiating table.

¶4. (C) Qatar is increasingly suspicious of Egypt, which is diverging increasingly with Qatar over Darfur mediation. It is possible that Al-Mahmoud will ask that the USG convey to Egypt its support for Qatar's efforts in Darfur. If so, it will not be the first such request. So far, Qatar's leaders have not seen evidence that Washington has supported Qatar's Darfur mediation in USG discussions with Egypt.

¶5. (C) The Qataris believe it is important that Libya have a visible role on Darfur. Of late, they have not expressed any reservations, to us at least, about Libya's lead on Chad-Sudan mediation. It is not entirely clear to us the extent to which Libya is fully on board with Qatar's efforts on Darfur.

16. (C) I look forward to your visit and supporting your efforts to advance U.S. aims in Darfur. We should have the opportunity before your meetings here to strategize on the steps ahead. While the military, commercial and educational relationships the U.S. maintains with Qatar are excellent, the political relationship will take a concerted effort to improve. But the opportunity for that is clearly there, and Qatar's role in bringing peace to Darfur will help shape the future of the people of Darfur as well as the bilateral road ahead between the U.S. and Qatar.

THE U.S.-QATAR RELATIONSHIP

17. (C) The breadth and depth of Qatar's relationship with the U.S. is impressive, especially for a country the size of Connecticut, with about two million inhabitants, of whom only about 225,000 are actually Qatari citizens.

-- Because it is so small and its energy resources so large, Qatar now has an annual per capita income of over \$60,000 (the highest in the world). Qatar's national revenues will continue growing despite the global economic crisis, although their upward trajectory will be moderated by a drop in commodity prices.

-- This wealth has helped bolster the country's regional policies that too often have been at odds with U.S. objectives. Examples include Qatar's relations with Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria. (Their Darfur effort is a notable exception.)

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-- Until recently, Qatar was not fully cooperative in intelligence sharing and combating terrorism financing, which also led to tensions with Washington.

-- At the political level, the bilateral relationship has been cold, but it is improving. Prime Minister Hamad bin Jasim has told us Qatar wants to "close the chapter" of poor political relations with Washington, and he recently visited Washington for a series of meetings with senior Administration officials.

-- In contrast to the political relationship, the U.S.-Qatar military relationship is solid. Qatar provides the U.S. military exceptional access to two major Qatari military installations, Al Udaid Air Base and Camp As-Saliyeh -- two of CENTCOM's most important operating installations outside of Iraq. Qatar charges us no rent, and in fact is funding over \$700 million in construction projects for the exclusive use of the U.S. military.

-- The U.S.-Qatar economic relationship is vital. U.S. energy companies have invested tens of billions of dollars in the oil and gas industry here. Qatar, which holds the third largest natural gas reserves in the world after Iran and Russia, is expected to become in 2010 one of the most important suppliers of imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the U.S. market.

-- Our educational and cultural relationship with Qatar is strong and growing. Qatar has committed itself like few other Arab states to modernizing its educational system, and has turned decisively to the United States for help. Qatar has imported branch campuses of six U.S. universities, including Texas A&M, Carnegie-Mellon, Weill-Cornell Medical School, Georgetown, Virginia Commonwealth, and Northwestern. At the elementary and secondary levels it is instituting a U.S. model of charter schools.

-- Al Jazeera, the television network with an Arabic-speaking audience of some 60 million, is based in Qatar and funded by the State of Qatar. The network's coverage, particularly by

its Arabic service on issues important to the United States, has long been an irritant in our bilateral relationship. We nevertheless recognize the value of USG officials appearing on Al Jazeera in order to ensure that official U.S. voices are heard in the Arab world. Because it is funded by the State of Qatar, Al Jazeera avoids reporting critical of Qatar. In any event, Al Jazeera remains an important source of outreach in Arabic -- and increasingly in English on a separate network -- to viewers around the world.

¶18. (C) We are happy to arrange interviews on Al Jazeera for you if you have interest and your time on the ground in Doha permits.

QATAR'S STRATEGY OF BALANCING COMPETING INTERESTS

¶19. (C) SAUDI ARABIA: The Amir's family, the Al Thanis, have ruled Qatar for more than 140 years. Given the small size of Qatar and a desire to stay in power, the Al Thani family does its best to stay on good terms with larger regional players, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. The relationship with Riyadh had been strained following perceptions in the Kingdom that Al Jazeera's coverage of the Saudi royal family was unflattering, leading the Saudis a few years ago to pull their ambassador. However, a Saudi ambassador returned to Doha a little over a year ago, and relations are generally improving.

¶10. (S) IRAN: The Qataris deeply distrust Iran and oppose that neighbor's nuclear weapons program. But sharing the third largest non-associated gas reserves in the world with Iran obliges the Qatari leadership to maintain a "working relationship" with Tehran. As an example of the balancing act Qatar plays with Iran -- and elsewhere -- Qatar will not close the one Iranian bank serving Qatar, as we have asked. Nor, however, will Qatar allow Iran to open additional banks, as we expect the Iranians would like. Instead, in classic Qatari fashion, the government announced it had granted permission to the sole operating Iranian bank to open a second branch -- on the same day former Treasury Secretary Paulson visited Doha in June. Such behavior does not satisfy either the U.S. or Iran, but it exemplifies how the Al Thani leadership tries to maintain balance between competing interests. (Think also of Qatar's relations with Iran juxtaposed to the considerable U.S. military presence in

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Qatar.)

¶11. (S) RELATIONS WITH BAD ACTORS: Qatar's contacts with Hamas are consistent with the current Amir's stated desire to have good relations and contacts with everyone, and his belief that Hamas won in free-and-fair elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in January 2006. The Qatari leadership also appears to calculate that maintaining relations with bad actors such as Hezbollah and the Iranians helps ensure Qatar's security by serving as an insurance policy against attack -- a real concern given Qatar's hosting of U.S. military personnel and the perception of this by extremist elements in the region.

¶12. (S) RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL: Up until January, Israel maintained a quasi-diplomatic presence in Doha. Qatar's "freezing" of Israel's Trade Office presence occurred in the wake of the failure by Qatar to achieve a quorum of Arab leaders for an Arab League Summit aimed at addressing the crisis in Gaza. The subsequent Doha Summit on Gaza, attended by a large Arab and Palestinian contingent from the rejectionist camp, voted to break off ties with Israel as a protest over Gaza. Qatar acted immediately; Mauritania later.

¶13. (S) The January Summit, held days before President Obama took office, got the Qataris off on the wrong foot with the new Administration. Senior Qatari officials have since made

clear their strong commitment to a continued strategic relationship with the United States. We predict that Qatar, which continues to tell the Israelis that bilateral contacts are welcome, will look for an opportunity to reopen the Israeli Trade Office. Having jettisoned their own policy of maintaining overt good relations with Israel, however, Qatari officials are no doubt hoping for a gesture by the Israelis vis--vis the Palestinians that would allow Qatar to reverse itself with dignity.

THE TREND FOR INCREASED DIPLOMATIC ACTIVISM BY QATAR

¶14. (C) LESSONS FROM LEBANON: Qatar, led by the Amir and Prime Minister, successfully mediated among competing Lebanese factions in June, to much acclaim in many parts of the region. In doing so, the Qatari leadership reaffirmed its belief that Qatar's policy of having open doors across the ideological spectrum in the region was important to promoting stability in the region. The parties to the Lebanese conflict were brought to Doha and lodged in the Sheraton Hotel. Senior Qatari officials, including the Prime Minister and Amir, shuttled back and forth between various hotel rooms in a coordinated effort to narrow the gaps between the parties. The Amir, failing to convince Hezbollah to sign on to the draft agreement that the other parties, in some cases begrudgingly had accepted, called the Presidents of Syria and Iran to ask for their help with Hezbollah's leadership. They did, and we think Qatar's leaders drew three important conclusions:

(a) A small state getting along with everyone can accomplish what larger states (Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia in the Lebanese example) cannot;

(b) Good relations with bad actors (in this case Syria and Iran) can lead to tangible and beneficial results for the region and the world; and

(c) Resolving the Lebanese conflict increased regional stability and paid dividends for Qatar's own security and global standing.

¶15. (C) EGYPT AND SUDAN: Qatar's success on Lebanon may have encouraged its leaders to take issue publicly with Egypt on its mediation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict during the Gaza crisis. It is clear that President Mubarak remains furious with the Qataris over their behavior in December, and Egypt's bitterness is endangering Qatar's current high-profile mediation initiative on Darfur, which has been supported by the U.S. since your predecessor, Richard Williamson, visited Doha in November.

¶16. (C) MEDIATION, NOT MILITARY MIGHT: Considering Qatar's wealth, its growing confidence in mediating disputes, and the prestige that such involvement brings, we expect Qatar will continue to carve out a regional diplomatic role for itself in the coming years. A few of Qatar's initiatives have foundered, including an effort to mediate a ceasefire between

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the Yemeni government and the Shi'a Houthi rebels in the north. A half-hearted attempt to bring Hamas and Fatah rivals together also yielded nothing. Closer to Sudan, in recent days the press has reported that Qatar has been asked to mediate with parties in Somalia, including those affiliated with off-shore pirates.

¶17. (C) Qatar, with a population of fewer than 250,000 citizens, will never be a military power. Having its sites set on regional diplomacy and mediation is quite realistic, however. Also, despite the global economic crisis, Qatar's ample natural gas reserves should provide sufficient money to invest in the global good. Improving stability through

mediation in a turbulent region where Qatar's military resources are meager makes inherent sense. What resources Qatar is putting into its military are aimed at providing airlift capacity for humanitarian interventions. Qatar in the coming months will take possession of U.S.-origin C-17 aircraft, and it is well possible that Qatar may seek to use those aircraft to bolster tangibly its diplomatic initiatives, such as by supplying humanitarian needs in Africa (including Sudan).

LeBaron